Courage My Friends Podcast Series VII – Episode 6
Who's Hungry? More Than Ever Before

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ANNOUNCER: You're listening to *Needs No Introduction*.
Needs No Introduction is a rabble podcast network show that serves up a series of speeches, interviews and lectures from the finest minds of our time

RESH: Where food bank visits in Toronto now outnumber the population of Toronto, what accounts for the unprecedented rates of hunger across the city and indeed across the country? Who is hungry and are food banks the answer? Is growing food insecurity a sign of systems breaking down or evidence of unfair systems working exactly as intended? And from our food systems to government, what changes must we demand to even begin to tackle the crisis of hunger in Canada?

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COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: Welcome back to this podcast series by rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute at George Brown College and with the support of the Douglas Coldwell Layton Foundation.

In the words of the great Tommy Douglas...

TOMMY (Actor): Courage my friends, 'tis not too late to build a better world

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: This is the Courage My Friends Podcast.

RESH: Welcome to episode six of this season's Courage My Friends podcast. Who's hungry? More than ever before.

I'm your host, Resh Budhu.

This week, we're joined by Executive Director of Toronto's North York Harvest Food Bank, Ryan Noble, and Co-Executive Director of Food Secure Canada, Marissa Alexander.

We discuss this year's Who's Hungry report, and the exponential growth of food insecurity and poverty in Toronto, and indeed, across Canada. What brought us to this point and the desperate need for policy solutions to meet the demands of an accelerating hunger crisis across the country.

Marissa and Ryan, welcome. Thanks so much for joining us.

MARISSA: Thank you

RYAN: Thanks for having me.

RESH: Lovely. So, Marissa, you're actually joining us from Food Secure Canada. Tell us about your work and the organization's mission.

MARISSA: Yeah, absolutely. So, Food Secure Canada is a national non-profit that focuses on advancing a healthy, just and sustainable food system through three key ways. So one is being a knowledge hub for folks from coast to coast to coast.

The second is through advocacy work.

And the third is through convening work. So bringing folks together. We actually just finished last week our 2024 convening. which was, I would say, a great success.

RESH: Wonderful. And just to get into some of the terms. So, you're working on food justice, food systems, and also food sovereignty. What do you mean by food sovereignty?

MARISSA: Yeah, so I think food sovereignty really comes down to that piece about people having the, ability to choose what, when, how much they want to eat and not having that impacted by where they are, their financial challenges and or a situation and as well as their cultural background. And so being able to choose how you engage with the food system or food systems - if you wanted to be a part of your own food systems - all of those pieces need to be considered to be able to be food sovereign. I think food sovereignty in most definitions would include also sustainability. So what is the relationship with the food systems and the land.

We do have to acknowledge that the term food sovereignty really initiated from Indigenous food sovereignty. And then we have been able to use it in different iterations for different cultures and races as well. And food sovereignty means something different to each person, to each community, to each group. And so really allowing those individuals in those communities to decide what food sovereignty means to them.

So it's very much sort of this ground up approach.

RESH: And this is under the large umbrella of food justice ?

MARISSA: Yes.

RESH: Thank you. And Ryan, tell us about North York Harvest Food Bank and your role.

RYAN: Sure, Resh. I sometimes think it is a somewhat unfortunate name for the organization because we operate through partnerships that go beyond the borough of North York in northern Toronto.

We don't really harvest anything. And I think we go beyond what most people would consider as a traditional food bank.

So what do we do? We are primarily the distribution hub for a large piece of northern Toronto and we collect donations of food and funds, and we distribute that out through a network of 37 different community partner agencies. So that is, you know, I think what most people think of as a traditional food bank.

But because of the unique challenges that we face and the unique geography of the sort of inner suburbs of Toronto, we also operate four community-facing food spaces that are in neighborhoods that are of high priority for us.

And then, in addition to that, we operate a social enterprise where we purchase, source, procure, distribute warehouse food for about 200 different public sector institutions and nonprofits all across the GTA. So we do a lot of different programming. That's sort of all wraps together in how do we deal with the emergency food needs today, but also equally important to us is how do we create long-term solutions, so that ultimately everybody in our community is able to meet their own food needs without the need for charity.

RESH: So you're essentially working to put yourself out of business.

RYAN: Yes, that's one thing we always say, but I would add a little bit of nuance to that. Because I think the business that we want to put ourselves out of is the sort of chronic need for charitable food distribution.

There's always going to be a need for sort of emergency support and neighbors helping neighbors. And that's never going to go away. We're always, going to need safe and welcoming community-oriented spaces and food can play a really important role in that.

So we would like to do more of that type of work and less of what I would characterize now as really sort of filling gaps in our social safety net that is creating, as I said, a chronic need for charitable-based food assistance. That's the piece of our work that we want to see reduce.

RESH: So speaking of this chronic hunger that's really now forefront, North York Harvest Food Bank, in partnership with Daily Bread Food Bank, just released the annual Who's Hungry report on poverty and food insecurity in Toronto. What are some of the key findings from this year's report? Because they are quite dire.

RYAN: I think the most shocking sort of overall finding is that 1 in 10 Torontonians turned to a food bank over the last 12 months to meet the most basic necessity of life, which is food. So, 1 in 10 Torontonians. And when you think about that, just sort of walking on the street or being on transit or in your workplace or your school or what have you, if you look around 1 in 10 are at the point where they are turning to

charity to make sure that they have enough food for themselves or for their family to eat.

That was up from 1 in 20 two years ago; and even at that level, that was shocking and some of our worst nightmares coming true. And we continue to see, you know, unfortunately, sort of the same story. And that story is not going to change until we make different decisions as a society and those that are in decision-making power take the situation a little more seriously.

RESH: Right. Now how is the research for the report generated?

RYAN: So it's a survey. It's a survey of food bank users, and we conduct that , as you said, in partnership with the Daily Bread Food Bank, through the various agency networks that we build support. So it is - and we should be clear - it is a snapshot of food bank usage at that given time, which is usually in the Spring of every year and then we tabulate the data and release that in the Fall.

So it is a moment in time. It is a proxy for food insecurity at a larger at a community level. But I think also it's important to note that food bank usage is only that, it's only a proxy. And it's dependent a lot upon the availability of resources and the accessibility of resources.

What I mean by that is, you know, across the geography of Toronto, you see big gaps in the number of visits to the food banks in the northern former inner suburbs of the city. There's actually an excellent visualization in the Who's Hungry report showing that map, and that might lead you to believe that there's not need for assistance in that northern half of the city, when in fact, the opposite is true.

What food bank visits are showing is as much the availability of food banks, which are concentrated in different areas of the city, versus what the actual need might be.

RYAN: And so I think to Marissa's earlier point, we believe that people should have the right to food in this country and should be able to have adequate food for themselves, irrespective of where they live. And what charitable resources are based around them.

RESH: And so again, going back to the point you made that this data is really only generated about food bank usage, but does not necessarily reflect the actual food insecurity that we would get from like Stats Canada or something like that.

Marissa, , could you speak to that question in terms of what we're seeing of food insecurity across Canada? How does the country compare to Toronto?

MARISSA: Yeah, I absolutely can reference the national data.

It's pretty dire. It's not looking good. Before we even get into the actual numbers, we also have to acknowledge, and similar to what Ryan was saying, is that the way that

this data from Stats Canada comes out is through an income survey. And so that is still gonna be voluntarily admitted.

And I think that's a flaw because there's a lot of reasons why somebody wouldn't necessarily feel comfortable telling the government that they might not be able to afford food for themselves and or their families So there's a big flaw in the numbers there.

There's also a flaw in the sense that the information that Stats Canada gathers is gathered separately from the provinces and the territories. And so we can look at the numbers for the provinces, but the territory numbers are slightly different and tend to also be quite low, just based on the survey format.

And then last sort of caveat before even going into the numbers is that the Canadian Income Survey that this is based on, does not survey Indigenous folks on reservations, really remote communities, and especially in like northern regions, as well as the unhoused. And those are all three folks that we know are at a higher risk of living with household food insecurity.

So we're going to get into these numbers, but the reality is it's probably quite a bit higher, because we are missing a huge chunk of people who we historically know are at risk of household food insecurity.

Having said that, the numbers of folks who are living in food insecure households in the provinces has jumped up.

So this is the 2023 data because obviously the 2024 is not out yet. But it went up 50 percent for folks who are severely food insecure. And then went up 22. 5 percent for folks that are moderate. And then stayed relatively the same for marginal food insecurity. That in itself is horrifying.

And the numbers are actually very, very dependent on a lot of different factors. But let me just pull up the exact number for you so I don't misquote. It's 8,690,000 in 2023.

RESH: 8,690,000.

MARISSA: In Canada.

RESH: In Canada.

MARISSA: Yeah.

RESH: And as you said, there's also a problem with the measure that it's based on income. It leaves a lot of people out. Those traditionally vulnerable communities who are always hit hardest and first by every crisis including this one.

You also have other measures like what's used in Europe, the Material Deprivation Index, which is not just about income, but is about quality of life. Right? Standard of living, which some are saying is more accurate. But what is the threshold at which someone is determined to be food insecure? What do you use at Food Secure Canada?

MARISSA: Yeah, and I want to speak to that point, Resh, around this is income-based because we know that income is one of the biggest things that impacts your ability to access food. Oftentimes it's shown as there's not enough food or people don't have the food skills, but I think we really need to drill home that it is absolutely an income-based solution. And then there is also other challenges that would add to your likelihood of living with food insecurity, but income is really one of the number one indicators.

As you mentioned, material deprivation also in line with that same thing. If you do not have the basic needs or the basic stuff that you need to survive, that is going to impact your ability to feed yourself.

But to answer your question, there are three categories of household food insecurity: marginal food insecurity, moderate food insecurity, and severe food insecurity.

So your marginal food insecurity is anybody who is worried at any point about running out of food, and or they're limiting their food selection due to a lack of money for their food.

The moderate food insecurity is more compromising in the quality or quantity of your food due to a lack of money for food. So you might be buying something that is cheaper than what you would prefer to buy to make up for that.

And then your severe food insecurity is where you would be missing meals. You would be reducing your food intake. And the most extreme cases would be going days without food.

All three of those are considered being food insecure. And so I think a lot of folks wouldn't necessarily identify themselves as being food insecure unless they had heard those definitions. And maybe wouldn't realize that they might be in sort of that moderate or marginal food insecure category because they think, well I ate today, so I'm better off than someone who didn't.

And I think the fact is, if you are at any point worrying about not having enough to eat, that's an issue.

And then also acknowledging that we're talking just about having enough to eat. But if you're also not able to eat culturally appropriate foods, then that is not food secure either.

RESH: Right. And thank you for that clarification. And I'm sure a lot of listeners are thinking, Oh, wait a minute, I actually fit into one of those categories.

So getting back to the report, Ryan, who is hungry? What populations or demographics are we seeing at food banks in Toronto?

RYAN: Just to connect it to some of the definitions that Marissa just outlined, 50 percent of our survey respondents in the report, had missed a meal to pay for something else, and almost a third, 29%, had gone a full day without eating. So that puts people into that moderate to severe category.

So, you know, what we're seeing, obviously, when you're talking about 1 in 10 Torontonians, - there was about 3. 5 million visits to food banks in the city last year - every case is unique. Every case is complex.

But I think we can sum it up with some overall kind of themes. Who we see, and you mentioned it Resh, are the people who are most vulnerable in our community and whose support structures have just been allowed to sort of wither away. And as I said, there is complexity, but basically Income is one of the main drivers of what drives people to a food bank.

So if you look at somebody's household ledger, their income is insufficient to deal with the challenges they're facing with the cost of living here in Toronto today.

So that is true for people who rely on social assistance. That is true for people who are under-employed of unemployed That is true for people who have a serious disability or an illness and rely on disability benefits. That is increasingly true for seniors who rely on pensions.

So all of those income supports, whether they are publicly funded or whether they are wages from employment are insufficient to deal with the costs that somebody is facing. And for 90 percent of food bank users, they're living in an unaffordable housing situation. So housing is the largest cost on the other side of someone's household ledger. But increasingly groceries and other essential benefits are rising in price to unsustainable levels as well.

So when you put those two things together, it's not surprising as to why people are turning to charities like North York Harvest Food Bank or Daily Bread Food Bank to meet those basic needs because there simply isn't enough income on one side of somebody's household budget to deal with the costs of living on the other side.

And as a result, people skip meals or go days without eating and turn to charity to fill that void. That to me is the common thread throughout it all.

RESH: And systemic discrimination obviously is part and parcel of this, right?

So systemic racism, for instance, tends to go hand in hand with underemployment of racialized communities. Eighty percent of food bank users are racialized as well, correct?

RYAN: That's right. You're seeing the intersection of systemic barriers due to racism and how that manifests itself in terms of income, lack of income and ultimately food insecurity.

As well, the disproportionate number of new food bank clients, and we're seeing that growth year over year, are from newcomers as well, which is demonstrating the lack of appropriate settlement supports. So as people come to the country, they're unable to establish themselves and have a truly sustainable livelihood. And again are forced to turn to charities to fill that void.

MARISSA: I just wanted to add to that because I think Ryan made a great point about the folks that are often slipping through the social supports. But I also think it's really important to note that increasingly we're noting that with the data coast to coast to coast, across Turtle Island, that folks who are living with household food insecurity are also folks who have full time employment and/or are working multiple jobs.

So it's no longer just those folks who are on maybe like disability or EI. It's now folks who are actually employed and who are still living with food insecurity.

RESH: So I was going to ask about that. I'm glad you brought that up because among the new and accelerated users of food banks, the majority again, I think it's around 59 percent according to the Who's Hungry report, but also across Canada, are people who are employed or are living with somebody who is employed? So what's going on there? Because that would seem to be a contradiction. Why are people who are getting an income also having to access food banks?

MARISSA: It's capitalism, right? Plain and simple, unfortunately, right? We're living in a world where we've commodified food. And so even though under the UN declaration, we have an agreement that food is a human right, we have commodified it. So people cannot afford it anymore and are not being paid basically a living wage to match up with the inflation of our food systems and the food that is going up in price

RESH: Right, so wages are not keeping up with the rising cost of living and and wages also aren't what they were say, like, 50 years ago, right? Because more precarity, I think, has become the norm for those who are looking for jobs now, rather than just being able to access the long-term, sustainable, lifelong job.

MARISSA: Yeah, absolutely. We know that now a third of folks budget is going to food as opposed to it was quite a bit lower many years ago.

RESH: Right. Now another group of new users that I think for the first time is in the Who's Hungry report, Ryan are students.

RYAN: Yeah, just getting back to the point about employment as well, and you're right, for the first time, the majority of food bank users come from a household where at least one person is employed. And so we're seeing growth there. We're seeing growth amongst students and graduates that have a post secondary degree, as well as seniors.

And so I think what that tells us is the broader economy has shifted dramatically. And we spoke about it from the employment perspective because it is about wages, but it's not only about wages. Obviously for precarity, lack of benefits, lack of stability, all sorts of changes, very, very rapid changes in the employment sector. Same thing happening for students and the same thing happening for seniors.

So the things that we used to associate, or still might associate with being able to prevent someone from slipping into poverty, things like a wage, things like a post secondary education or things like a pension are no longer working. And what that tells us isn't anything about those individuals. It tells us that the broader economic climate, our broader society has changed dramatically and we have not seen the appropriate support systems. And I'll say that including publicly funded social assistance systems, but also private systems such as employment, just aren't keeping pace with the costs and challenges that people are facing.

And so you put those two things together, and people are left with giant gaps in their household budgets and turn to charities like food banks to fill that gap.

MARISSA: I might also just add and I super appreciate that Ryan is I think there's also this narrative too, that a lot of folks have that we need to shift out of which is who is more likely to be "undeserving" and who is likely of being "deserving". And again, that comes back to a lot of cultural values and things that are really baked in at an early age. But I think this is sort of this idea that the food banks and charities as they are have oftentimes to folks felt like, oh, it's poor people. It's people who don't have enough money. It's people who cannot do these things. People who can't work or who are not willing to work. And I think we really need to shift out of that very, very problematic narrative and recognize that nobody is untouchable and that everybody is being impacted by this. And the majority of middle class folks are being impacted by this more and more. And so shifting away from who we believe deserves to have the support systems and the access is a really challenging piece, but it is also a piece that every individual can do on their own.

RESH: Right. And, this goes back to the English Poor Laws that really governed Canadian social policy for years and years and years. This cleavage between the deserving poor and the undeserving poor, and in every case, it was a charitable solution. But it is frightening how quick and easy the slide into poverty and hunger truly is, because this could be any of us, and in fact, it will be many more of us if this situation continues.

RYAN: I'm really glad Marissa raised that because every day we deal with those stigmas we deal with those biases. But I think it is really critical that we shift that narrative and we reframe what the problem we're actually trying to solve is.

And that is if we start with, we believe, and we've enshrined as a human right, that everybody should be able to meet their own food needs without the need of charity, without the need of somebody else. Everybody should have that basic ability and that basic right. And the systems that we find ourselves in, public or private, are not allowing an increasing number of people to be able to do that.

And so what we end up seeing at our food spaces are the most vulnerable. And again, that's true across many different types of people, many different populations that are hit the hardest and deal with that systemic breakdown, that societal failure. Deal with that most acutely and then turn to charities because they have no other places to go.

So again, it's not about people who didn't make the right decisions or made a bad choice or anything like that. What we are seeing, I think, and what we have to ask ourselves is, are we comfortable living in a society that is increasingly, systemically breaking down and forcing the most vulnerable of our neighbors and our friends to not be able to access the the most basic necessity of life. I think if we ask ourselves that, the problem starts to look maybe a little different than it does on first glance, for some folks.

RESH: Absolutely.

MARISSA: To just go back to the point that Ryan just said about the systems breaking down. And I want to push it one step further. And I fully agree with what he's saying. But I want to push it further and say that I don't think the systems are breaking down. I think the systems are working exactly as they were designed, which is not to support those who are the most marginalized and oppressed.

So it's actually not a failure, it's a very intentional oppression of folks. And I think we have to acknowledge the systems at play, as mentioned, like capitalism, but also the patriarchy, systemic racism and oppression, all of those pieces really play a role in who gets the support or who the systems were designed to support. And I think what we are seeing now and what Ryan is dealing with day to day in his work is that we know that the systems were not built for people of colour or disabled folks or single parents or people on EI or the elderly, basically anyone who is no longer fit, white, heterosexual male.

And I think it's really important that we note that those systems are working exactly how they were planned to work. So if we're going to make changes to ensuring that those people aren't "falling through the cracks," we have to make sure that those cracks aren't designed for them to fall through.

RESH: And I want to get more into that point, but Marissa, you are calling in from BC, right?

Okay. So we've been talking really about Toronto and what's happening here in detail. What is the situation like in BC? How does that compare?

MARISSA: Again, Food Secure Canada is national coast to coast to coast. But over in BC, yeah, it's very similar, you know, lots of folks living in food insecure households, it's increasing about the same.

BC is, I would say sort of moderately like in between , they're not the worst, not the best by any means. But it is still a really, really high percentage of folks who are living with that increased and severe food insecurity.

RESH: Okay, now the subtitle of the Who's Hungry report is "Trapped in Poverty, Unprecedented Hunger in Toronto", and honestly, this could be applied to any of the last few years and likely the coming year as well.

Back in 2022, during the pandemic, the CEO of the Daily Bread Food Bank, Neil Hetherington, was on this podcast. And at that time, food bank visits in Toronto had hit its highest number at 1.68 million. And I think this year's report talks about that it took 38 years to get to that point. But now, two years later, after lockdown and amid increasing employment, food bank visits have more than doubled to, as you said, Ryan, 3.49 million, which is about a million more than last year in 2023.

We've spoken about factors that are contributing to hunger in Toronto. But is there something significant that has contributed to this most recent exponential increase in hunger and poverty?

RYAN: I think unfortunately the story is the same story that we've heard for a number of years. And you're right in that we don't have to go that far back to see the numbers we're seeing today and realize that they were kind of our worst nightmares.

When the report was released a couple of weeks ago, we said at North York Harvest that we had broken our record of usage three times in the last year. And since then, we've been able to finalize our October stats, and that's the fourth record break in the last 12 months. So what was at one point sort of a crisis that we couldn't imagine is unfortunately now something that we're seeing month after month after month, and it's becoming a bit of a new normal. And I hate to say that because it's not normal. But we're dealing with it more regularly.

I think when we look at what are the factors, what I can tell you is what food bank users tell us is driving the challenges that they're facing. The largest one is affordable housing and the lack thereof and perhaps not surprising. Other than that, raising the minimum wage, increased newcomer supports, job training and job hunting programs for those who are unemployed and increased social assistance benefits.

So it's not as if there's been a sudden shock over the last year. What we're seeing is the continued culmination of insufficient supports for people, public and private, to

deal with skyrocketing costs of living. And as I said, every case is unique, but I think that's the overall theme. And the overall common thread throughout the vast majority of visitors to food banks are insufficient supports, whether those are employment supports, social assistance supports, settlement supports, to deal with an out of control cost of living, primarily driven by housing, but also by the cost of food and other essentials.

RESH: Food security is part, as you're saying, of the matrix of survival connected to basically everything we need, right? So as you said, housing, income, also status, ability, race, class, gender, etc. And it is a key social determinant of health. Marissa, what are the health outcomes of food insecurity?

MARISSA: Oh, that's a great question because they're numerous. There's so many and it's really, really disappointing.

So folks living in household food insecurity are at a higher risk for a lot of what we call food-related issues or diseases that are not necessarily caused by the food, but are impacted by your food and their quality of food.

So hypertension, diabetes, arthritis, anything that basically eating a well balanced diet and healthful diet, whatever that means to you, can impact is going to be impacted.

But there's also a lot of the mental health pieces. So people living with household food insecurity are at higher risk for depression, chronic anxiety, suicidal ideation, and overall just being mentally unwell.

As well as the social implications of food insecurity, right? Which also impacts your health. So, eating together, making food together, being able to go to the grocery store and buy your own food or the food that you're choosing, there's a lot of dignity in that. And that also impacts your health and well-being overall as well.

Yeah, it's pretty staggering the impacts of living with household food insecurity on your health.

RESH: Yeah. And it's almost a self fulfilling prophecy, right? That it just impacts everything else. So it's a vicious type of cycle. And Ryan, you said that every situation is different, but what are you seeing among the clients at food banks? What does this live like? What does this look like for them just to bring it down to an individual level?

RYAN: Well, I think it's a struggle, right? And it's a struggle for people who are in very vulnerable situations, very dire situations. It's also difficult to often access a food bank. So it's difficult on a number of fronts.

I mentioned earlier that food bank usage is only a proxy for food insecurity in that someone being able to go to the food bank depends on being able to access that

service, means they need to have transit to be able to get to a space. There needs to be a space that is available, that it's safe and welcoming for people to be able to gather. Obviously a challenge during the pandemic, but it's a chronic challenge. So what we're seeing at the sort of community level is a lack of appropriate supports. These are charitable-based programs.

Food banks, for the most part, do not receive any government funding. They rely upon the generosity of people in their community. And at a very local level, North York Harvest Food Bank, for example, was started in our founder's apartment, was literally neighbors supporting neighbors. And I think that's a beautiful concept.

But when we start to institutionalize that, when that starts to scale up, becomes very problematic. And it becomes very insufficient and nowhere near designed or equipped to deal with what is ultimately a societal challenge.

It's a struggle for a lot of folks to find food banks, to be able to access them, in ways that are appropriate, where timing lines up and hours of operation and all these types of things. There's a lot of drawbacks.

One thing though, that I will also say, when we speak to clients, we use our spaces as sort of convening points and community gathering spaces as well, because we know those types of spaces are becoming scarcer in the city.

We do hear people who come to food banks for a sense of community, for a connection to other people. Recently, we are trying to amplify client voices and promote self-advocacy and give opportunities for people to be heard and to amplify those voices and use the platforms that we have.

So that's where I said earlier, we cannot replace a social safety net. We cannot replace an economy that is more equitable and working for more of us. But what we can do is be those convening points and really be the manifestation of neighborliness and human generosity. I think that's a wonderful thing. It just cannot deal with what is ultimately a societal problem.

RESH: Right? So the pressure on food banks is immense, but it's interesting that these places of food charity have also become these convening points of food advocacy and community-building around this.

Now, Christmas is right around the corner as well. So what is this winter looking like for food banks?

RYAN: Oh, I mean we're in a really precarious spot, and I don't want to pretend otherwise. We continue to see the support from community, whether that's in the form of donations, food donations, volunteerism. The spirit of neighbors helping neighbors continues to remain strong. But again the challenge that we are being faced with is no longer that, is no longer community building. It is filling gaps in our society, filling gaps in our social safety nets.

To that end, you know, food banks are exhausted. Food banks are stretched way beyond what they were ever intended to do. Way beyond what they actually can do. As I said, most do not receive government funding. Most do not have dedicated spaces. Many don't have operating budgets, they are purely volunteer-driven. And to think of increased number of people that are turning up to spaces that are insufficient to begin with, has really stretched us far beyond the exhaustion point. And so what that means is we are seeing food banks curtail their hours, limit the people that they're serving, or the number of people that they're serving, the frequency that people can visit, or in some cases, closing altogether.

So there's a limit to what we can do. We're far beyond that, and I'm really quite concerned about what this winter holds.

RESH: There are a number of painful ironies at work here, because Canada is not an impoverished country. We're not a poor country by any means. We're one of the most economically developed nations on the planet, and Toronto is its financial and business capital. Yet every year, poverty and hunger is increasing, and disproportionately, as we've been saying, hitting the most vulnerable.

And the very populations we're relying on to grow the economy, because we're not reproducing fast enough, are the ones who are joining the ranks of the hungry. So as you said, young people, newcomers, including international students, racialized communities, Indigenous Peoples, who are the youngest and fastest growing.

So it seems that chronic food insecurity could be stunting the growth of the nation as a whole. Marissa, you started to talk about this, that this is systemic and intentional. So could you speak more about this? What is keeping this country from feeding its people? Because it seems like there's a choice that's being made here.

MARISSA: It's a tough question because I personally do not understand. Like I understand what's happening, but I don't understand the choices that we are making to continue in these systems. But yeah, what is keeping folks is again, this commodification of our food system, because the reality is that our current food system in Canada makes a lot of people a lot of money. So there's not necessarily a lot of benefit to restructuring it.

For example, we know that the grocery stores are becoming closer and closer to a monopoly ownership. Five major companies own the majority of I think it's 70 percent of the grocery stores that we have in Canada, right. And so those people are making a lot of money and there's not a lot of benefit to them not them, not making that money . And by owning that they can also decide the prices. There's this corporate concentration and that in itself is really beneficial to a lot of people who are very close to decision-makers.

There is also very long-term import/ export relationships with other countries. And so it actually isn't super beneficial, even though in Canada we probably could produce a lot of the food that we needed if we shifted our diets to be more seasonal. But that's

not, of interest because we want to maintain those import/export relationships, again, bringing that money in.

And folks who are chronically unwell physically, mentally, socially, all of those things are a little bit easier to manage and to control. And oftentimes we're so focused on sort of that survival day to day, that we're not really looking up and we're not really questioning, you know, why isn't this working for me or what can I do to ensure that it's working for me because we're all too busy just trying to make it to the next couple of days.

RESH: Ryan, you said that food banks are not the answer. And you've also said that "food bank usage is driven by chronic policy failure". Could you speak a bit more about that? And what are the policy actions that we need to see put into place? Because that is a large part of the report as well.

RYAN: Yeah, I mean, this is a choice that we've made as a society. There is no shortage of income. There is no shortage of food in the country or in the city. And yet we have three and a half million visits to food banks over the last year in Toronto.

We mentioned the social determinants of health before. We know that at a macro level, at an overall level, that the costs to address the level of food insecurity that we're seeing is far smaller than the downstream costs in our health care system, for example. We know that. That research is well documented. And yet we still don't make the types of changes that we need to actually address the issue at its root. So these are choices that we're making as a society.

RYAN: I think the stories that we've told, we've been telling them for a number of years. We know food banks aren't the answer. We know what is. The Who's Hungry report does an excellent job outline a lot of detailed policy recommendations.

But what I would get back to is, what we need to see at a household level is a better balancing of income and supports on one side of the ledger with costs on the other.

So what does that mean? For those who are relying on social assistance, North York Harvest has long called for increases to Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support here in the province.

We've called for increases to minimum wages as well for those who are relying on employment as their primary source of income.

And on the other side we need to see actual real progress on affordable housing. We hear lots of rhetoric about that, but we're yet to see truly affordable housing solutions being put in place from any level of government.

And so until those two pieces, income on one side of the ledger and costs on the other start to come more in line with each other, we're going to continue to see

people that food is the sort of flexible piece in the budget, and people will have to make those very difficult decisions to make ends meet.

So again, just to kind of summarize, I would call for increased disability benefits, increased social assistance rates, increases to minimum wage and affordable housing solutions. And another one is the grocery and essentials benefit at the Federal level that would help as more of a one time support to help people take care of the costs of food and other essentials. I think those are sort of the framework of what a longer term solution would look like.

But we could start with each level of government, and I'll speak here locally, just making good on promises that they've already made. You know, in some ways, what I've just outlined, I don't want to say is aspirational because it's absolutely realistic. But even falling short of that and just making do on promises that have been made.

So at the local level here at the municipal level, passing a real Poverty Reduction Strategy that's been delayed for months, if not years now for unknown reasons.

The province speaks a lot about affordable housing and yet we don't actually see those real results.

At a federal level the Canada Disability Benefit was something that was passed unanimously last year, but is far short of what people in the space were actually calling for.

So just making do on commitments that have already been made by all three levels of government would be a start. It certainly wouldn't be the answer, but it would be a start. And a pathway towards getting us towards something that resembled a real long-term solution.

I'll point out as well, and not to get too political about it, but you know, we have an NDP sort of affiliated municipal government. We have a Conservative provincial government and a Liberal federal government, and all three have failed on this. So this is a bipartisan failure, if you will, at all levels and across the political spectrum.

RESH: That's interesting. It is very much and as you said, it's been failing for years.

I mean, food banks were brought in, what, like 40 years ago, and they were only supposed to be there as a short term contingency emergency measure, but they have essentially proliferated, been institutionalized as we've sort of institutionalized a food crisis across the country.

And just another question though, where food banks are a lifeline, literally a lifeline for so many in the short-term; are they also being used by government to sort of absolve themselves of any long-range policy solutions to hunger and poverty? Are they using food charity to sacrifice food as a right?

RYAN: I would say so. I mean, I think the sad reality is, and the very frustrating reality is again, we've told this story and similar stories for years now and we're being ignored. And we're being ignored by choice.

At the same time, we can't stand by while hundreds of thousands of people are turning to us for support. We take that really seriously.

But we also know that we can't be quiet while politicians and those in power continue to turn away and continue to abdicate their responsibilities as public office holders because charities exist.

So I think food banks - I certainly speak for North York Harvest Food Bank, but I know I'm not alone - really wrestle with that paradox and really wrestle with finding ourselves in a very impossible situation where we know we are not the solution. We're not proclaiming to be. In fact, just the opposite. Again, we've told that story, I think, for years now. But at the same time dealing with the reality that there are increasing numbers of people that are turning to us for support. And so how you navigate that is really difficult.

And again, at our best and where we started, where food banks were community-based responses, people doing what they could do within their power, within their very local neighborhoods. And I think that's beautiful. But that cannot replace a true, robust social safety net. That cannot replace an economy that's inclusive and equitable. And increasingly we are being asked to fill those roles at an institutional level, and I think that's where we get into a really dire situation.

RESH: Right, and you know we live policy on the ground, and if we want sustainable food, we need good, sustained policy.

Marissa, tell us about the work of Food Secure Canada to connect food security to the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals, because your organization has been doing a lot of work on that. And that really sort of anchors your advocacy on policy as well, right?

MARISSA: Yeah, it absolutely does. Thank you.

Yeah, the sustainable development goals are these 17 goals. For example, goal one is no poverty. Goal two is zero hunger, right? And hoping to have these achieved by 2030. It's 2024. It's not looking good. But these are goals that the government of Canada has signed on to and agreed to.

I think it's extremely important and the goals range from all sort of areas of life. Things like life below water and climate action, which we know are all deeply intertwined in our food systems and things that all need to be adjusted before we are able to have a sustainable food system.

As Ryan mentioned, civil society is being tasked with doing the work that really should be up to the government. Food Secure Canada is a non-profit that is made up of organizations like, North York Harvest Food Bank, other organizations and food banks at the provincial, territorial, regional level, as well as the local level; all of folks that are doing the work to advance that policy and to push towards those sustainable development goals that realistically we know should be addressed by the government, not by civil society.

Civil society should most definitely be included and be a part of those conversations and the solutions and the pathway of how we get to those goals for 2030, but it shouldn't be the majority of the work put on us to to get to that.

Having said that we are doing that work, and I think it's really valuable. And there's a couple reports that you can find on the Food Secure Canada website of the type of work that we've done. But I think it really comes down to what Ryan was saying of this needs to be non-partisan work or, basically politics proof, right?

That isn't something that people can put on their Parties as a ticket to get votes, but it needs to be something that is solidified in our systems so that it doesn't change every couple of years if the government changes.

Food Secure Canada has worked on a couple really big policy pushes and policy changes. One of which would be the People's Food Policy Project where we basically had the privilege of speaking to folks from coast to coast to coast about what does it look like for them to have a policy specific to food, and that was just put in place in 2019. So we didn't have a specific food policy in Canada until 2019. And a lot of that was thanks to the work of civil society brought together by Food Secure Canada.

Another example of how much we really can impact that policy change would be the National School Food Program. And so that policy was put into place just 2024, just this year, thanks to our colleagues at the Coalition for Healthy School Food that sits under Food Secure Canada. And we've been advocating for that for about 10 years before it actually got into place.

And there's definitely a question of was it finally approved because it was a way that the current government could say, Look, we did it. This is why we should continue to be in power. And I think that's where the issue is. When we're having these basic human rights being used as voting tools, that's when we have challenges with things being dropped.

There is a Canadian Food Policy Advisory Council that was also really advocated for from Food Secure Canada and our colleagues and members. We really, really strongly encouraged that basically a place for both industry and civil society and folks from across our different levels of food systems to be able to speak directly to government and share what policy changes or what's needed in the food system based on people who are actually working and living in the food system.

And unfortunately that came together, but it's been shelved. Again, based on likely new government leadership. And so it's tough because it has to be something that can withstand changes in government because it really isn't a certain political Party, it's everybody is being impacted by this, regardless of your politics.

RESH: Right. So it has to be a sustained, untouchable human right, say a Constitutional Right. Yeah.

Ryan, for listeners of this podcast, how can people become involved in advocating for food security and really ending hunger for good? What are some of the key actions that people can now start to take?

RYAN: I'd be remiss if I didn't say if people were in a position to support their local food bank, whether it's North York Harvest Food Bank your local food bank, I can almost guarantee that they need your support right now. So, if you're in a position to make a donation of food or donation of funds or donation of time through volunteering, you know, I would encourage people to support your local organization. They're on the front lines dealing with a very impossible situation.

But beyond that, and working towards a long term solution, there's a couple of tangible things that people could do right now or in the near future.

The Who's Hungry report is available on our website, so I would encourage you to go to northyorkharvest.com and check that out.

There's a lot of information on who is coming to food banks and the policy asks that we are calling for. And then share that. And share that publicly. And when you do, tag your local elected representatives to help make sure that your voice is heard. And I think that those are just starting points.

But we will most likely here in Ontario have both a provincial and a federal election in the next year. Which means candidates are going to be coming and knocking on your door or meeting with you outside of the transit stops or what have you. And I think it's really important that those candidates hear directly from everybody, how important seeing real meaningful long-term solutions to hunger and food insecurity put in place immediately. We know what those are. We've been calling for them for years. And so it's a matter of political will to actually put them in place.

And I think the best way to do that is for us to mobilize our collective voices and raise the alarm so that it is so loud that people cannot continue to look away and people are forced to really notice what is happening in their communities. And again, I think the best way to do that is to share the findings that we have. Use them in the way that is most applicable for you. But particularly again as election season rolls around into the next couple of months to make sure that candidates are hearing that directly from the people that need to hold them accountable through their votes.

Beyond that, we have community action groups and all sorts of different forums and channels and ways that we can help to, as I said previously, to amplify voices from our community and gather those together so it becomes louder and louder and that alarm becomes harder to ignore.

So, again, you can find some information out on our website and join us and be part of that as well.

RESH: Lovely And the link to the report and both of your agencies will be in the show notes to this program.

And Marissa, Food Security Canada's mission is to help build and empower an equitable food movement. So your take on how listeners, how people can become involved in this mobilization.

MARISSA: Yes, thank you. I just wanted to add to Ryan's point there about, you know, it can be really daunting to think about how do I connect with my local politicians and local candidates.

And, if that is the way that people are feeling, Food Secure Canada has a campaign and it's called Eat, Think, Vote and this will be our fourth year of running it during the election season. And really what it is, is, we create the resources, the support to be able to bring folks in, host an event where you share food and you speak to your candidates. And ideally it is a bipartisan event, so you're bringing folks from all different Parties together, and you are sitting them down, and you're asking them, from community to potential elected politicians, where is food and where are the priorities in your party? And what are you committing to?

And I think as Ryan was saying is, we know the answers, but sometimes bringing folks together and having that conversation can really change where you go with your vote and where you put your vote, because it is really, really powerful.

Our other Executive Director, Wade, did this when he was living in Iqaluit, in Nunavut. And that event that he held, completely changed the colour of Nunavut, right? It completely changed that, based on the answers that those politicians, or future politicians, gave.

And so I think it's really important to have that local connection, because it filters up. The, the government is used to hearing folks talking about Eat, Think, Vote. They're used to hearing, oh, yeah, right, you had an event, and this is what was prioritized. And FSC does all kind of the background work for folks to be able to do that.

So that is a great tool. And any organization can support or hold one of those events.

I'll be reaching out to Ryan at right after and see if this is something he's interested in potentially doing, because I think it really allows folks to connect with their local politicians and prioritize what is important for them in their region.

Organizations like Food Secure Canada, we are not doing the challenging work that Ryan is doing on the ground. What we are doing is that policy advocacy piece, but we are also struggling because people don't understand. They don't understand the impacts. They don't necessarily see the impacts. But again, there is so much evidence that civil society being involved in these decision-making changes discussions is so, so valuable.

And so, getting involved with an organization like Food Secure Canada in any way you can, again, I would also be remiss if I didn't say if you have the capacity or energy to donate, sponsor the event. Or fund any situation where we are able to bring folks together, so that our voices are more powerful as one. Because across the entire food systems, there's a lot of folks who are working towards the same thing in their different industries and their different sectors and when we come together and use an entire food systems lens that's where that change actually can happen and when government cannot ignore us when we're all pushing for the same thing

RESH: Absolutely.

There is indeed power in numbers, right? And we all got to eat, right? Marissa and Ryan, thank you so much. It has been a pleasure.

MARISSA: Thank you so much, Resh.

RYAN: Thanks, Resh.

RESH: That was Marissa Alexander, Co-Executive Director of Food Secure Canada and Ryan Noble, Executive Director of North York Harvest Food Bank. Links to the organizations and to the 2024 Who's Hungry report are posted in the show notes to this episode.

And this is the Courage My Friends podcast. I'm your host, Resh Budhu.

Thanks for listening.

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